

A Guide to Help Media Accurately Cover Substance Use Disorders

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA's) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, encourages people nationwide, including the media, to understand the realities of substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery. The media plays a critical role in shaping perceptions about the risks and realities of addiction.¹ Because of the media's relevance in communicating information to the general public, CSAT is providing this guide for the first time to specifically help the media understand addiction, treatment, and recovery.

Today's media environment is pressured by tight deadlines and fewer staff members who each cover several beats, giving way to fewer experts in the fields of addiction and health.² Facing tight deadlines, journalists often lack the time to adequately research topics, such as addiction, before finalizing stories – and it may be hard to keep up with the advances that have been made over the last 20 years in understanding the disease and how to treat it.

Print and broadcast reporters are challenged by having to provide instant and continuous breaking news, making it difficult to provide complete coverage to readers and viewers.³ Unknowingly reporting inaccurately about the issues surrounding substance use can contribute to the misrepresentation of addiction, treatment, and recovery, and potentially influences risky behavior.⁴

Conveying the truth about substance use disorders and effective treatment and recovery can help diminish the misconceptions associated with addiction and treatment. It also can assist those battling with substance use disorders – as well as those close to them – so they better understand the problem and can seek help.

20 Years of Progress

- 1986** The Office of Substance Abuse Prevention (OSAP) is created.
- 1989** The United States celebrates its first *Treatment Works! Month*, later to become *National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month*.
- 1990** The Americans with Disabilities Act passes and includes protections for people with mental health problems, including substance use disorders.
- 1992** President George H.W. Bush signs the Alcohol, Drug Abuse and Mental Health Administration Reauthorization Act, creating the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).
- 2000** The Drug Addiction Treatment Act passes, allowing physicians to treat opioid addiction with certain narcotic medications.
- 2003** The New Freedom Commission on Mental Health is created and calls for the transformation of mental health care in the United States, including substance use disorders, to a focus on recovery.
- 2003** SAMHSA launches the *Access to Recovery (ATR)* grant program to increase access to treatment.
- 2005** The Center for Substance Abuse Treatment within SAMHSA hosts 100 stakeholders to discuss a renewed emphasis on recovery. The word "recovery" is given a formative definition for the first time.
- 2007** SAMHSA's *Report to Congress on Co-Occurring Mental and Substance Use Disorders* identifies barriers to appropriate treatment and support services and proposes a system in which co-occurring disorders are addressed and treated as primary illnesses.

JOIN THE VOICES FOR RECOVERY

With nearly three-quarters of the population believing that recovery from addiction to marijuana, prescription drugs, and alcohol is possible and 58 percent viewing recovery from addiction to other illicit drugs, such as heroin or cocaine, as a real possibility, it is incumbent on the media to highlight these benefits throughout communities.⁵

We are working to help media better understand addiction for the 20th anniversary of **National Alcohol and Drug Addiction Recovery Month (Recovery Month)**. The 2009 theme, **“Join the Voices for Recovery: Together We Learn, Together We Heal,”** emphasizes the need to use all available resources, in our communities and on the Internet, to educate people and their families about the disease and to help those with substance use disorders, and those close to them, get support. It also celebrates the power of community support and understanding. By opening a dialogue about the harmful effects of alcohol and drug addiction on families, friends, and communities, we can provide hope, healing, and better help those struggling with substance use disorders embark on a successful journey of long-term recovery.

This document includes basic facts about substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery and will help dispel common misconceptions about addiction. You will find tips for reporting on these topics and information and resources to make the jobs of reporters and broadcasters easier and their coverage more accurate. For more information, refer to the **“Overview,”** **“Commonly Misused Substances,”** and **“Treatment and Recovery”** pieces of this toolkit.



**Elizabeth
Currier**

The day my world began to crumble, January 6, 1976, I had my last drink. Until then, I had no idea that my drinking was a problem. After all, I was a social drinker – or so I thought. On that night, my 15-year-old daughter overdosed on a combination of phenobarbital and brandy and almost died. I met with a counselor at the hospital to talk about my daughter, but the first words he said were, “Your daughter says you drink too much. Do you?” Thus began a series of “higher powered” events – there are no coincidences – that started me on an incredible journey. That first year was a rollercoaster ride of hating myself, having my eyes opened and then questioning again whether I really had a problem, but all the time, being loved unconditionally until finally I began to get it.

This journey has given me a life beyond my wildest dreams. I’ve come from a place of loneliness, shame, and fear to one of love, joy, and purpose. I have the skills to be of service in addiction prevention, treatment, and recovery. The greatest blessing has been my family. My four children, raised in the chaos of addiction and manifesting addiction in their own ways, have found their own pathways to recovery. The addiction cycle, I truly believe, has been broken for this family.

Now, I have the privilege of devoting all my time to living, promoting, and supporting recovery. I am active in the recovery movement at the federal, state, and local level, serving on the boards of *Faces and Voices of Recovery*, *Friends of Recovery New York*, and my local recovery community organization. I am proud to say, “I am a woman in long-term recovery from alcoholism.”

Basic Facts About Substance Use Disorders, Treatment, and Recovery

There were 23.2 million people aged 12 or older who needed treatment for a substance use disorder in the United States in 2007. Given this prevalence, the general public should understand the impact of addiction on people's lives, their family and friends, and the overall well-being of their communities.⁶ The effects of a person's struggle with alcohol and/or drug use reach beyond the individual person – influencing and encumbering relationships with loved ones and dismantling quality of life.

A substance use disorder, like many chronic ailments – diabetes, high blood pressure, asthma – is a disease that can affect anyone. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to treatment, and addiction can be successfully managed, but like other conditions, can require more than one round of treatment to be effective.^{7, 8} Recent studies indicate that over the past 25 years, treatment and recovery support services have worked to reduce drug use.⁹

People experience recovery in different ways. Some people recover on their own; others recover through treatment and/or the assistance of self-help, mutual-aid groups, or medication-assisted therapies. Over the past few years, policymakers, providers, community service workers, and researchers have focused on holistic and recovery-oriented approaches to overcome substance use disorders that use a wide range of age-, gender-, culturally, faith-, and drug-appropriate services to help people recover not just physically, but mentally and spiritually as well.¹⁰

In the United States today, there are more than 11,000 specialized drug treatment facilities that provide rehabilitation, behavioral therapy, counseling, medications, and other types of services to those with a substance use disorder. Whether treatment was obtained at a hospital, rehabilitation facility, doctor's office, self-help group, or other treatment and recovery center, 3.9 million people aged 12 or older received some form of treatment for a problem related to alcohol or drug use in the past year.^{11, 12}

Some people are in denial and others are concerned about misconceptions associated with their addiction; this makes it difficult to provide them with the support they need. In 2007, an estimated 93.6 percent of people who needed treatment did not receive it because they felt they did not need it.¹³

MYTH: Addiction is a personal choice, a character flaw.

FACT: Through recent scientific advances, we now know that drug addiction is a brain disease. Each drug changes how the brain functions in a specific way, which has a powerful influence on all aspects of a person's behavior. A person's drug use can go from voluntary to compulsive – making alcohol or drugs the greatest motivator in his or her existence.

As evidenced by the 2008 expansion of the Mental Health Parity Act of 1996, which provides equity in insurance coverage of mental health and substance use disorders, addiction is a medical condition that should be treated like any other illness.

SOURCES: *Myths About Drug Abuse & Treatment*, The Partnership for Drug-Free America
Web site: http://www.drugfree.org/Intervention/WhereStart/13_Myths_About_Drug_Abuse.
Congresswoman Shea-Porter Hails Passage of Mental Health Parity Act. Congresswoman Carol Shea-Porter (D-NH), news release. September 23, 2008.

MYTH: Treatment programs are not effective.

FACT: Studies indicate that drug treatment reduces drug use by 40 percent to 60 percent and can significantly decrease the amount of criminal activity during and after treatment. Treatment has been shown to improve one's prospects of employment, with gains at nearly 40 percent.

SOURCE: *Myths About Drug Abuse & Treatment*, The Partnership for Drug-Free America
Web site: http://www.drugfree.org/Intervention/WhereStart/13_Myths_About_Drug_Abuse.

People sometimes encounter barriers in their effort to obtain treatment and recovery support. From 2004 through 2007, 35.9 percent of people who made an effort to obtain treatment did not receive it due to a lack of health insurance coverage and the inability to afford it.¹⁴ Accurately conveying the value of support, treatment, and recovery in media coverage is essential to helping people acknowledge the power and reality of recovery.

Reporting About Substance Use Disorders and Recovery

The media shapes how the general public perceives substance use disorders. As you are a conduit to the general public, keep the following points in mind when reporting any story of a person dealing with an addiction, as well as when covering any general issues surrounding substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery:

- Despite some of the myths around addiction, **it is a real disease** – similar to asthma or diabetes – and can be treated and successfully managed over time.
- **Addiction ripples throughout the country.** It is a multi-faceted disease that affects not only the individual, but one's family, friends, and the community at large.
- **Stories about addiction, treatment, and recovery are real,** and such issues can cause families and loved ones personal, emotional, and health struggles.
- There is no silver-bullet approach to treatment and recovery. **Each person's treatment and recovery process is unique** to individual needs. But new treatment approaches continue to emerge as the recovery field has evolved over the years.
- **Help is available,** and media should remind readers and listeners about SAMHSA's 24-hour National Helpline, **1-800-662-HELP**, for information and treatment referrals in English and Spanish.

Include these angles in your coverage to reduce the number of myths associated with addiction and recovery and better support those affected by alcohol and drug use.

MYTH: The public's attitudes toward people with substance use disorders have no effect on whether a person gets help.

FACT: During 2004 through 2007, two of the top reasons people gave for not receiving treatment for an alcohol or illicit drug dependence included worries about possible negative effects on one's job (11.6 percent) and concern that receiving treatment might cause neighbors and the community to have a negative opinion of the person (11.1 percent).

SOURCE: *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, p. 81.

Resources for Reporters

The following resources provide additional information about substance use disorders, treatment, and recovery. Use them as references when constructing articles or broadcast stories about this health topic.

- **Information about substance use and treatment** – The “Treatment and Recovery” and “Commonly Misused Substances” documents in this toolkit
- **What people are saying in the treatment and recovery field** – The *Addiction and Recovery Guide* – a useful online tool offering treatment and recovery information, as well as a message board for sharing questions and experiences
- **Technical resources on the prevention and treatment of substance use and mental health disorders** – The Partners for Recovery Web site – a SAMHSA initiative
- **Personal treatment and recovery stories and experiences** – The *Recovery Month* Web site – <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> – and the *Faces and Voices of Recovery* Web site

For additional facts about the impact of substance use disorders and treatment in the United States, please refer to the following government sources:

- SAMHSA’s *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*
- SAMHSA’s Center for Substance Abuse Treatment
- SAMHSA’s “Accessing Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery Online” Webcast
- SAMHSA’s Drug Abuse Warning Network (DAWN)
- National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

For more information and organizations that can help provide treatment and other resources, visit the *Recovery Month* Web site at <http://www.recoverymonth.gov>. Information on treatment options in your area and the special services available can be found at SAMHSA’s “Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment” Web site, a portal that includes a searchable database of more than 11,000 U.S. treatment facilities and additional treatment resources. For additional *Recovery Month* materials, visit <http://www.recoverymonth.gov> or call 1-800-662-HELP.

Web sites or event examples mentioned in this document and on the *Recovery Month* Web site are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment.

SOURCES

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- 2 Nevill, T. Gavin, Northrop, Peter, and Rohrer, Jameson. "Journalist Glauber discusses the future of print media," *The Etownian*, September 2008.
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- 5 *CARAVAN® Survey for SAMHSA on Addictions and Recovery* Fact Sheet. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Communications, 2008, p. 2.
- 6 *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*. DHHS Publication No. (SMA) 08-4343. Rockville, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Office of Applied Studies, September 2008, p. 80.
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- 8 *Principles of Drug Addiction Treatment: A Research-Based Guide*. NIH Publication No. 99-4180. Bethesda, MD: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute on Drug Abuse, October 1999, p. 2.
- 9 *NIDA InfoFacts: Drug Addiction Treatment Methods*. CenterSite, LLC Web site: http://www.centersite.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=doc&id=9143&cn=14. Accessed August 15, 2008.
- 10 Venner, K.L., Matzger, H., Forcehimes, A.A., Moos, R.H., Feldstein, S.W., Willenbring, M.L. et al. "Course of recovery from alcoholism." *Alcoholism, Clinical and Experimental Research*, 30, 2006, pp. 1079-1090.
- 11 SAMHSA's "Find Substance Abuse and Mental Health Treatment" Web site: <http://www.samhsa.gov/treatment>.
- 12 *Results From the 2007 National Survey on Drug Use and Health: National Findings*, p. 77.
- 13 Ibid, p. 81, Figure 7.7.
- 14 Ibid, p. 82.